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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003160

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: LEBANESE FORCES PARTY ASSESSES ITS OWN  
AND THE FPM'S FUTURE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

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11. (C) According to two senior party officials, the Lebanese Forces (LF) are buoyant following Samir Ja'ja's speech on September 24, which may have drawn more than 100,000 people. Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), on the other hand, is losing popularity in the LF's view. While the FPM is currently seeking power through political maneuver, its headstrong persistence in an alliance with Hizballah suggests that the party seeks to destabilize Lebanon as well. Meanwhile, the LF remains a committed member of the March 14 movement. It seeks to overcome its bloody militia past, and also embraces its character as a Christian party and has judged that confessional politics are here to stay for the foreseeable future. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Polchief and the Ambassador's Special Assistant met with Lebanese Forces officials Elie Khoury and Jean-Marie Kassab September 28. Both were LF fighters who saw action in the Lebanese Civil War and left Lebanon in 1989 to pursue business careers abroad. Khoury, who only returned in 2005, is now one of LF leader Samir Ja'ja's political advisors. Kassab, according to his own account, is only now re-engaging with the Maronite political movement and is a senior leader "without portfolio." They reflected with bitterness on the violence of the civil war, the suffering it caused to their militia, and the failure to achieve any lasting resolution of Lebanon's confessional disputes.

JA'JA' RALLY

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13. (C) Our LF contacts were buoyant following the September 24 Harissa rally at which LF leader Samir Ja'ja' addressed a strikingly large crowd of people outside the Harissa Cathedral. When Emboffs asked how many attended, the officials noted they would not give an estimate in public. Hizballah puts great stock in the number of supporters it can gather; but the LF as a smaller party does not intend to play the numbers game with Hizballah. They told us that their internal estimate was that 150,000 supporters were present at the LF rally. When Emboffs expressed surprise at the large estimate, Khoury claimed that the mountain setting of the Harissa Cathedral, along with unfortunate camera placement, diminished the size of the crowd apparent in television

coverage. Both Khoury and Kassab noted, as had Embassy personnel who were travelling in the area on September 24, that LF supporters were clogging roads for miles around Harissa.

¶4. (C) Khoury told Polchief that the Harissa area has a mix of political affiliations, including Aounists and independents. He said there had been a clash "between Aoun supporters and ex-Aounists" in Harissa on the day after Ja'ja's speech. According to Khoury, the authorities had to break up a street fight between the two gangs. The source of the tension was a dispute over the direction of the FPM and its flirtation with Hizballah.

WHITHER THE FPM?  
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¶5. (C) Polchief asked Khoury whether, in light of Aoun's confrontation with March 14 figures and the FPM's attempt to organize with Hizballah a majority bloc comprising the Christian and Shia communities, it is possible to conclude that the FPM is not truly on a political track to power. Khoury agreed that the FPM is capable of causing unrest (principally via street demonstrations and possible confrontation with the Sunni-dominated ISF) to effect political change, but doubted that Aoun would make such an attempt until all political avenues -- including the demand for a national unity cabinet -- were exhausted.

¶6. (C) Both LF officials regard Aoun as mentally unstable, driven by an overwhelming desire to attain the presidency, and willing to sacrifice national stability for his ambition. His Free Patriotic Movement is losing popularity due to poor political choices -- lending credibility to the view that the

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FPM has chosen to gather the kind of power that it and its ally Hizballah derive from their numbers, muscle and Syrian support.

NEXT STEPS FOR LEBANESE FORCES  
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¶7. (C) When the conversation turned to the future of confessionalism in Lebanon, the LF officials explained that it is still the strongest current in Lebanese politics, and unavoidable. They called the FPM and the other parties' claims to multiconfessionalism "nonsense." The Lebanese Forces will remain a Christian-dominated party for the foreseeable future. Partly this is due to the LF's reputation as the successor to a Christian militia, and partly to the need to organize and protect the interests of the vulnerable Lebanese Christian community. Nevertheless, both officials deeply resented the LF's lasting association with the militia and its violent acts.

¶8. (C) The LF is committed to the March 14 grouping of parties, however. Khoury held out hope that Parliament Speaker Berri's Amal party and Aoun's FPM would see fit to ally themselves with, if not join, March 14. He agreed, though, with Polchief's doubt that Berri would provoke an open split within the Shia, a split from which he might not emerge the victor. Berri is not a risk-taker, Khoury agreed.

¶9. (C) Khoury told us that the LF is the only parliamentary member of the March 14 group committed to electoral law reform. The rest of March 14 is not enamoured of the concept but would go along with reform. As for early elections, the LF is deeply in favor as the party felt that it had been cheated, as were the other Christian parties, in the 2005 election. Constitutional worries aside, the LF would support early elections, even in the face of opposition from its March 14 allies. (Note: The LF currently has five members in the Parliament. End note.) Khoury stated that his party could have fought for more in last June's elections, but gave way to other parties in an attempt to keep up the Cedar

Revolution's momentum. End Note.)  
FELTMAN